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ABSTRACT

This monograph examines the features of writing in three journalistic media: television, radio and print. The monograph is relevant not only to students and teachers of journalism but also to those interested generally in the field of composition studies. It offers a highly specific analysis of the differences among the writing styles for these three media--differences that are often felt by student and teacher alike but rarely described in detail. Comparative in orientation, the monograph examines each of the three media in all major sections: (1) Leads; (2) Story Structure; (3) Sentence Structure; (4) Word Choice; (5) Names, Quotes and Attribution. Each of these sections discusses a number of distinct points; three columns, one for each of the media, highlight the comparisons. The section on "leads," for instance, looks at summary leads, datelines, beginning with names, the umbrella lead, an item lead, an anecdotal lead, a delayed lead, a buried lead, question leads and quote leads. Also, Appendix 1 shows the results of several interviews with media writers; they were asked a broad range of questions concerning clarity in the media. Appendix 2 offers a college curriculum guide to students preparing for a career in journalism. A 47-item bibliography relating to journalism skills is attached. (TB)

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Writing Style Differences in Newspaper, Radio, and Television News

Irving Fang



CENTER FOR INTERDISCIPLINARY STUDIES OF WRITING

MONOGRAPH SERIES • No. 1 • 1991
LILLIAN BRIDWELL-BOWLES, SERIES EDITOR

UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

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The Center for Interdisciplinary Studies of Writing
University of Minnesota
227 Lind Hall
207 Church Street S.E.
Minneapolis, MN 55455
612-626-7579

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Irving Fang

Professor
School of Journalism and Mass Communications
University of Minnesota



CENTER FOR INTERDISCIPLINARY STUDIES OF WRITING

MONOGRAPH SERIES • No. 1 • 1991

LILLIAN BRIDWELL-BOWLES, SERIES EDITOR

PAUL PRIOR, EDITOR

UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

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The Center for Interdisciplinary Studies of Writing
227 Lind Hall
207 Church St. SE
Minneapolis, MN 55455

Director: Lillian Bridwell-Bowles, Associate Professor, English
Research Fellows: Susan Batchelder, Craig Hansen, Mark Olson, Paul Prior

Policy Board: Chris Anson, Associate Professor, English; Terence Collins, Professor,
General College; Jeffrey Derby, Assistant Professor, Chemical
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Preface

The members of the Center for Interdisciplinary Studies of Writing are pleased to publish this monograph on the features of writing in three journalistic media: television, radio, and print. This project was appropriate because it accomplishes one of the Center's goals: sponsoring studies of writing in particular fields or within a particular discipline.

Each year, the Center invites faculty from the University of Minnesota to conduct studies of writing in the following areas:

- characteristics of writing across the University's curriculum;
- status reports on students' writing ability at the University;
- the connections between writing and learning in all fields;
- the characteristics of writing beyond the academy;
- the effects of ethnicity, race, class and gender on writing; and
- curricular reform through writing.

We receive a technical report from each project, and these are available through the Center; when there is a wide audience for reports, we invite project directors to submit longer monographs.

Professor Irving Fang, long a respected journalist and author of textbooks in journalism, requested his grant from our Center to study writing in three journalistic media (radio, television, and print) because he perceived a need to compare and contrast them. As he notes in his report, many of the professors and teaching assistants charged with teaching journalistic writing have personal experience primarily in one or perhaps two of the three media. For these instructors, the monograph's side-by-side comparisons of stylistic features should be a handy reference tool. The monograph may also be used as a student text, providing a quick guide to features of style and their rationales.

In addition to the obvious audience in journalism for whom it is primarily intended, we also believe the monograph will be of interest to those in the field of Composition Studies. The work embodied here should expand our notions of how genre, medium, and audience interact and are realized in style. Material from this report could be used by students in general writing classes as they consider rhetorical and stylistic choices in a common field of discourse. Students are consumers of these three media and could be invited to conduct research on the features described by Fang through a first-hand study of their own reading, listening, and viewing experiences.

For the growing group of scholars interested in the "Writing across the Curriculum" (WAC)

movement, this monograph stands as a sample of WAC research. We will be interested in the effects of this information on the curriculum in our own School of Journalism and others elsewhere.

This monograph may also be useful for those interested in the rhetoric of journalism. Writing researchers typically limit themselves to the first three of the five canons of rhetoric that have evolved from Aristotelian theories: invention, arrangement, style, memory and delivery. As this monograph indicates, memory and delivery continue to be important elements for writers in journalism to consider. In radio, writers must consider the oral impact of their words and their sequential unfolding to audiences, sometimes in less than ideal circumstances (e.g., when the broadcast is "background," when the listener is engaged in another activity such as driving). Television imposes even greater demands on the writer because the spoken text must be combined with a sequence of images. In both radio and television, written texts are often intermingled with extemporaneous commentary and recorded material, adding another dimension to smooth delivery in both radio and television. Little research exists on these issues and other issues related to journalistic discourse across the media, and we invite responses to this initial exploration.

Lillian Bridwell-Bowles, Director
Paul Prior, Research Fellow
*Center for Interdisciplinary
Studies of Writing*
September, 1991

Introduction

Journalism students who begin the study of broadcast news often complain of the difficulty of writing in an unaccustomed style, a difficulty compounded when the student concurrently takes a broadcast news course and a print news skills course, such as basic reporting. Writing news copy in a separate style for each course presents the novice journalist with the type of confusion found in learning a new language. Many students leave with an imperfect understanding of any news writing style. (*See Appendix 2 for an example of a journalism school curriculum.*)

No magical way exists to learn a foreign language without practice, and none exists to develop a facility in more than one writing style without practical experience. Nevertheless, it may be possible to ease the burden of writing in more than one style by systematically comparing the styles to determine what sets them apart. Such a systematic comparison might find some practical use by journalism instructors, perhaps as a handbook. Introductory general news writing courses sometimes cover both print and broadcast news and some journalism curricula require students to learn to write for both.

While any number of textbooks offer guidance in writing news for a particular medium, no textbook to the author's knowledge undertakes direct comparisons, point by point, of the elements of these styles to note where they are similar and where they diverge. A combination of learning underlying principles to explain the reasons for the divergence plus learning of day-to-day practices in newspapers and broadcast stations might reduce the level of frustration just a bit.

Merely to tell a student to "write conversationally" for radio or television does not help much. Specifically what are the actual differences? Admittedly, no study of the stylistic differences in newspaper, radio and television news is likely to vanquish students' frustrations totally. Only the experience of a lot of actual writing, preferably done on the job under a competent, demanding editor, will bring the needed level of confidence.

The student's first encounter with writing news for print, if not at a school newspaper, will be in the classroom. There the student will also first encounter broadcast news writing. A classroom setting can be an adequate substitute for an internship or an entry level job if the instructor knows what to look for in correcting the student's copy assignments.

Yet, is the instructor competent to correct or edit the student's copy? This question, no matter how awkward or embarrassing, should be considered. In a basic media writing class which devotes

only one of a dozen units to broadcast news, the teacher and teaching assistants probably will not have had broadcast writing experience. As a consequence, they are likely to depend upon the material in the textbook for guidance. This can be a thin reed indeed to support even an introduction to the topic. This study was undertaken with the hope that a comparison of news writing styles citing differences point-by-point can offer additional guidance. Because few instructors have professional broadcast news experience, the dilemma exists of how to teach students what is distinctive about each news writing style and why there are differences in the first place. Readers of newspapers are, after all, the same people who listen to radio newscasts and watch television newscasts.

Why News Styles Differ

Differences are not due to happenstance. Writing styles have evolved in newspapers, radio and television due to the unique nature of each medium and to the manner in which each medium is consumed by its audience. An evolutionary process has been at work adapting each news writing style to its medium. Further, by taking note of the gradual shift of many newspapers to a more conversational writing style and the shortening of both television news stories and sound bites, one could well argue that the evolutionary process will continue.

Newspaper Style

News in newspapers is written so that it may be edited from the bottom up. As old editors liked to say, a page form is not made of rubber. It won't stretch. What doesn't fit is thrown away. Historians trace the inverted pyramid, which is not the traditional style of British or other foreign newspapers, to the American Civil War, when correspondents, fearing that the telegraph would break down before they could finish transmitting their dispatches, put the most important information into the first paragraph and continued the story with facts in descending order of news value. During the days of letterpress printing, the makeup editor fit lead type into the steel chase by the simple expedient of tossing paragraphs away—from the bottom—until the type fit the allotted space. In modern offset lithography the same job can be accomplished by a razor blade or a computer delete key; the editing, especially under time pressure, is often still done from the bottom of a story up.

The reading of a newspaper matches bottom-up editing. The reader's eye scans the headlines on a page. If the headline indicates a news story of interest, the reader looks at the first paragraph. If that also proves interesting, the reader continues. The reader who stops short of the end of a story is basically doing what the editor does in throwing words away from the bottom.

If newspaper stories were consumed sequentially as they are in radio and television newscasts, the writing style would change of necessity. If, for instance, a newspaper reader was unable to turn

to page 2 before taking in every word on page 1 starting in the upper left hand corner and continuing to the lower right corner, the writing style of newspaper stories would, I believe, soon resemble a radio newscast.

Yet, although the newspaper reader can go back over a difficult paragraph until it becomes clear, a luxury denied to listeners to broadcast news, it is also true, as one newspaper editor noted, that if the newspaper reader has to go back often to make sense of stories, the reader is likely to go back to the television set.

Radio Style

The radio newscast must be consumed sequentially; that is, the listener does not hear the second story in the newscast without hearing the first story. The eighth story waits on the first seven, which means in practice that all seven are chosen to be interesting to a significant number of listeners and are presented at a length which maintains that interest.

In addition to the inevitable centrality of thinking which affects story choice and story length, a pressing concern exists for clarity in both sentence length and word choice because the radio listener, unlike the newspaper reader, is unable to stop to review and reconsider the meaning of a sentence. The eye can go back; the ear can go only forward with the voice of the newscaster.

During the "golden age of radio," 1930-1950, before television sets began to appear in every home, the family gathering around the parlor radio console in the evening sat facing it, a natural thing to do because the radio talked to them. Today, it seems, no one looks at radios. They speak to us from under the steering wheel or over our shoulders. Unlike the attentive newspaper reader, the radio listener is often driving, working, or engaged in some task other than absorbing the latest news, and consequently is paying less than full attention. As a result radio news stories are written to be told in familiar words combined into sentences which run at comfortable lengths in a style known as "conversational." One textbook guideline suggests writing as if telling a story to a friend who is trying to catch a bus that is ready to pull away. ⁽¹⁾

Because listeners lack opportunity to go back to reconsider a bit of information, there should be no need to do so. This limitation affects the structure of phrases of attribution. It also affects the use of pronouns because pronouns have antecedents. The radio broadcast news writer learns to beware of innocent little words like "it." These conditions influence television news as well, but perhaps they apply with a little more force to the writing of radio news summaries, where news items average two or three sentences and then the topic shifts.

Particularly important is the care needed in the presentation of the numbers sprinkled throughout economic news. Writing news of the economy requires a balance between precision and understanding.

An additional difficulty in absorbing the information in a summary newscast is its demand on the listener's ability to keep up not only with a rapid delivery but also with the variety of news. The newscaster jumps from topic to topic, geographic location to location, as if the listener would have no difficulty in going from a flood in Bangladesh to a political crisis in Romania to a train accident north of town. Radio news is hard enough for anyone to follow, but the confusion is greater for people who are not on top of events.

The thoughtful newscaster takes these topical twists and turns into consideration in both writing and delivery; the newspaper editor need not give the matter a moment's thought. The radio news writing style that has developed includes the choice of simple words and short, declarative sentences. Attribution precedes statements as it does in normal conversation. Sentence structure is incomplete at times, such as verbless sentences. Purists may howl, but the reality is that understanding is more important than grammar to a radio news writer.

Television Style

Television news style is much like radio news style, for a viewer can no more return to a group of facts than a listener can. The viewer, like the listener, does not always focus on what the newscaster says. Television news adds further complexities when pictures join the words; that is, when anchors or reporters deliver what is called a "voice over."

Ideally the words that accompany a videotape story of an event are written, even under time pressure, only after the writer has viewed the unedited videotape and made editing decisions such that the pictures follow a logic of their own. In *practice* the ideal method of editing video first and writing text afterward is rarely followed in television newsrooms, but the better news writers at least keep the pictures in mind as they write, and the tape is edited to fit the words.

Besides all the other constraints which limit the writing of a news story—lead, chronology, clarity, etc.—the words should relate in some way to the pictures. If the words and the pictures do not support each other, they surely fight each other for the viewer's attention, a dissonance that detracts from understanding.

An examination of a random selection of television newscasts will demonstrate that nearly all of the fresh information is found in the words, but it is the pictures that carry the impact for the viewers. It is the pictures that will be remembered.

There are other types of videotape stories, such as news about the economy, which consist primarily of file tape chosen for the sole purpose of illustrating the words. Here, picture logic barely exists, yet care must be taken that the words are not overwhelmed by the helping pictures.

Economic news presents an additional difficulty, alluded to in considering radio above. The difficulty lies in communicating numbers. Television has one advantage over radio here because

numbers can be presented visually while the newscaster reads them; the presentation can be enhanced by graphs, pie charts, or other visual aids lacking in radio.

Comparisons of Style and Substance

Having noted all this, it should be added that, while distinctions between print and broadcast news writing certainly exist, more should not be made of them than is warranted. Broadcast news has been the butt of jokes and snide comments about its perceived lack of substance and "See Spot run" presentation, but the dominance of television newscasts coupled with the painful demise of many metropolitan newspapers has led to a reassessment of newspaper practices. Changes have included a less formal writing style. The result is not by any means the style of television and radio news, but there has been a trend in that direction. In fact, *USA Today* reportedly was designed to be a printed version of a television newscast both in style and substance.

Substance needs to be considered apart from writing style. The choice of stories, their length, and the choice of topics for leads are factors independent of writing style. Local television newscasts, particularly, have been criticized for their concerns with frivolous matters, with a penchant to chase after gossip, with time-wasting chatter among anchors, and generally with being the electronic equivalent of a backyard fence. Both radio and television newscasts, with the notable exception of public broadcasting, are criticized for devoting too little time to political and other matters of significance to public life. Defenders of the substance of newscasts have responded with a variant of the argument that it is pointless to preach to empty pews, that the newscasts have proven more adept at giving people the news they want, and that, in any case, newspapers are filled with the trivia of comic strips and "Dear Abby."

These arguments will not be pursued here, although it should be noted that an obvious correlation exists between simple writing and simple topics. It is easier, for example, to use one-syllable words and short sentences to report the mayor's arrest for drunk driving than to report on the mayor's presentation of the city budget. Real writing skill is demonstrated not in the former news story but in the clarity with which the latter is presented. If most television news stories seem to be written more clearly than stories in the newspapers, it does not follow that television news writers display superiority in the craft. A strong argument can be made that their choice of topics alone makes the difference. Pursuing this logic to its conclusion, one may argue that superiority in the craft of writing news, including visual elements, would be best demonstrated by the limpid reporting of complex events and situations by both newspaper and television writers. Their products could then be compared side by side. This paper originated in a wish to produce side-by-side comparisons, not to make invidious comments about the relative merits of journalists in different media but to show the differences themselves.

Side-by-Side Comparisons

Five central elements of news writing style have been chosen for examination in this paper: leads, story structure, sentence structure, word choice, and the use of names, quotations and attributions. Discussion of each of these elements begins with a summary of approaches shared across media, followed by the presentation of differences in side-by-side comparisons.

The stylistic guidelines in the following sections of this paper were compiled from three main sources. Our first step in this study was to survey journalism textbooks written for both print and broadcast news students, which usually deal with the subject of writing style by offering advice about such individual components as leads and attribution. (*See bibliography.*) This examination revealed a number of shared elements as well as a number of discrepancies between advice given for the print media and for the broadcast media. Second, journalists working in these media were interviewed for this paper. While they generally tended to agree with the advice in the textbooks, their recommendations were included. Finally, I drew on my own experience as a writer for many years of both newspaper and television news, plus a shorter period as a radio news writer. I had also previously compared newspaper and television news writing styles.⁽²⁾

Using Comparisons in the Classroom

This paper was prepared as a possible textbook supplement for several types of courses. As already noted, teachers and teaching assistants in introductory media writing courses may find it to be a useful addition to the units on broadcast news in their textbooks. Instructors in composition classes which do not have such specific units might consider the material here as an introduction to general news writing. These comparisons may also serve as examples of the interaction between writing and such factors as topic, audience, and medium.

Teachers of broadcast news writing might consider passing out selected portions as handouts to accompany their own lectures on such subjects as leads or attribution. Finally, some of what follows may be of value in high schools where journalism is taught, especially those where students produce newscasts.

A useful assignment based on material readily available is the rewriting of the day's newspaper stories in broadcast style. It is advisable to begin by passing out copies of a single local story from the newspaper with instructions to rewrite it as, say, a 20-second news item. (A full typewritten line takes about four seconds to read.) Discussion following the completed assignment ought to consider the approach taken (the "angle"), the clarity of the information to someone who will hear it only once, its level of interest, and, in every case, its fidelity to the original material.

A later assignment should be the writing of a summary radio newscast. Students can be given

copies of, say, eight local news stories with instructions to produce a two-minute newscast drawn from some of the stories. Each student now has to be concerned not only about the writing factors of a single news item, but also about fitting a group of stories together. What is the most important story? Why? Which facts should be included and which omitted? What should the second story be? How should the newscast end? Class discussion can conclude by having each student read his or her newscast aloud while the instructor holds a stopwatch. No assignment during the entire course may produce such tension and excitement. Broadcast news retains a special magic.

A note of caution must be entered. There is by no means universal agreement on what follows. Differences as to what is common or desirable exist not only among journalists but among individual outlets. It may well be that the writing style of *USA Today* has less in common with *The New York Times* than it does with *CNN Headline News*. Writing is, after all, art not science.

Notes

- ¹ Newsom, Doug and James A. Wollert. Media Writing: News for the Mass Media. 2nd ed. Belmont: Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1988.
- ² "A Study of Television News Writing Style for Listening Comprehension," Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, UCLA, 1966.

Leads

Shared Approaches:

- A focus, a single dominant point, is emphasized in the lead, then supported and expanded in the following sentences.
- Readers, listeners, and viewers want information they can share with others. In preparing a news item the reporter should use judgment to surmise what someone else would want to know of the event or situation.
- The reporter should consider what there is about an event that is surprising, which may be precisely what the reporter would want to tell someone else.
- All issues have at least two sides, else they would not be issues. The reporter should ask whether there is a disagreement or a full-blown controversy behind the news story. If so, what is it? Does it belong in the lead?
- Effects on readers/listeners/viewers must be considered.

Comparisons Across Media:

<i>Newspaper</i>	<i>Radio</i>	<i>Television</i>
1. A <u>summary lead</u> is best if it tells readers the most important of the 5W's and H: <u>who</u> was involved, <u>what</u> happened, <u>where</u>, <u>when</u>, <u>why</u> and <u>how</u> it happened. However, if including all 5W's and H will clutter the lead sentence, the less important elements are reserved for the following sentences. An ideal length is 35 words or less.	35 words is unusually long. A lead sentence half that length is better. It is more likely that only part of the 5W's and H will be heard. The <u>why</u> and <u>how</u> will be left for a later paragraph, or not included in a short item. Unless the time is significant, it is likely to be dropped on the understanding that today's newscast will present today's news.	Like radio.

2. The dateline, which identifies location, precedes the lead sentence. Local stories do not carry a dateline. The lead of a local story usually identifies the *where*: city-wide, in a particular neighborhood or suburb, or at a street address.

The lead sometimes begins with the location as a transition device, a way of redirecting the listener's attention away from the last story onto this new item:

In Lisbon, Portugal....

The lead, especially in network newscasts, may begin with location. For example, ABC anchor Peter Jennings might open a newscast by saying something like:

We begin tonight with events in Moscow, where....

and later say:

Now, the Middle East...

3. The lead describes the event in the context of an ongoing situation. The lead begins to put the current event in its historical framework. The body of the text will include a fuller historical perspective:

After a six-month investigation into charges of corruption in the Pine City attorney's office, Pine County attorney William Anderson today requested a grand jury hearing.

The lead usually contains the fewest details that will clearly relate the most significant element of the events being reported. History or any other context is likely to be left for the following paragraphs in order to keep the lead short and simple:

The Pine County grand jury has been asked to look into charges of corruption in the Pine City attorney's office.

Like radio.

Such a lead is not unknown in broadcasting, but it is more common to leave the history out of the lead.

4. The story may begin with an unfamiliar name, followed by age and address, followed by details:

Naomi Johnson, 34, of Pine City was killed last night when her car....

An event concerning a single individual, such as a car crash which killed one person whose name is not well known, usually begins with a report of the accident without the victim's name. What is familiar is identified first. The identification follows the lead:

A 34-year-old Pine City woman was killed when her car ran off Highway 64 near Five Points.

Dead is Naomi Johnson...

Like radio a television news lead follows the practice of going from the familiar to the unfamiliar.

Depending on the circumstances the television or radio lead may be as informal as:

That sharp curve on Highway 64 has claimed another victim.

or even the present tense:

That sharp curve on Highway 64 claims another victim

5. An umbrella lead can cover a number of events of approximately equal importance.

The Pine City School Board last night ordered studies of the danger from asbestos in city schools, complaints from parents about unsafe school buses, and possible savings that would result from closing Lincoln Elementary School.

That is definitely not a broadcast news lead.

The umbrella lead, which refers to more than one event, demands too much of the broadcast listener. Instead, radio and television news writers use the item lead:

The Pine City School Board has ordered a study of possible dangers from asbestos in city schools. (One or two more sentences about the asbestos item follow.)

In a separate action, the School Board will look into complaints from some parents that city school buses are

Like radio.

unsafe...

*And the Pine City School
Board is considering closing
Lincoln Elementary School...*

6. The opposite of an umbrella lead is known as an item lead. (An umbrella lead is also called a shotgun lead, and the item lead a rifle lead.) Here is an example of a multiple-element, umbrella lead from the *Chicago Tribune*:

A 31-year-old motorist was killed and 900 customers in Hammond lost electrical power Thursday after a commuter train plowed into the motorist's car and the wreckage hit a power pole, police said.

Here is a radio version of this *Chicago Tribune* lead:

In Hammond, a commuter train plowed into an automobile, killing the driver.

The age of the driver, loss of electric power, and some of the other details would go into subsequent sentences.

If videotape shows the driver's body being loaded into an ambulance, it might begin the coverage, with matching copy:

A 31-year-old motorist is dead after a commuter train hit his car and slammed it into a power pole in Hammond this morning.

7. While the lead has a focus, the news story deals with other aspects that do not fit with the focus. A report of an event should be complete, consonant with the importance and interest level of the facts.

In a radio news summary, there is seldom time to go beyond an expansion of the lead to other elements that do not fit with the focus given in the lead.

The focus of the lead serves as the theme of the entire news story. Television news stories seldom go into "on the other hand" explanations or disparate aspects of an event.

8. An anecdote or image can capture the essence of a story, unless it is a "hard news" story of a recent event.

Anecdotes are not common.

A videotaped example may be used as a lead to explain a complex issue; e.g., a housewife buying groceries to lead a story about the cost of living, even a hard news story based on just released economic data.

9. The delayed lead begins a highly stylized story, often a feature. The delayed lead intentionally holds back the key fact. The Wall Street Journal frequently uses these leads on their front page. Delayed leads can also be found in signed columns and in the British press.

The delayed lead could be used more often than it is, for it fits the sequential nature of broadcasting. The story is told as it happened. Here is an example, read on CBS Radio by Charles Osgood:

Early this morning a Metro construction worker named Edward Herndon was working at the Gallery Place Station on Seventh Street.

Normally Herndon worked below ground as a miner, but he was above ground this morning.

A passing truck set the platform to vibrating, toppling a three-ton hydraulic rig. Herndon, who was 33 years old, was crushed to death under the machine.

News stories accompanied by videotape do not lend themselves easily to delayed leads. It is better to lead with the most significant facts than to present a videotaped news story in narrative form.

10. The buried lead, in which the most important news appears in the middle of the story, should be avoided.

Although the important facts should not be buried in the middle of the report, the soft lead has value. The soft lead is a phrase or short sentence that directs the listener's attention to the news item about to be read, recognizing that the brain might need a moment to adjust to a shift from the locale and topic of the previous item. The soft lead can easily be overdone, turning hard news stories into features. It should be employed sparingly, and not at all with major stories.

The anchor often uses a soft lead to introduce a reporter package:

Weeks of talks about where to locate the new football stadium ended this afternoon. Bill Winter has the details...

Reporters write these anchor leads into their own packages. These leads avoid duplication of the phrases that they used in standups and live shots.

11. The when of an event belongs in the lead wherever possible, but is certainly part of the story.

Today's newscast is expected to carry today's news. When an event took place should be mentioned only if it is important to understanding what happened. "This morning" and "this evening" are more meaningful than "today."

Like radio. If the "when" is yesterday or earlier, omit it from the lead. Use it, if at all, in a later paragraph.

12. Question leads are not found in hard news stories. Occasionally used in light feature stories, they immediately involve readers.

Question leads are rare. They sound like commercials.

Question leads are rare.

13. Leading with a quote is less common than it used to be. A quote lead is written only when the quotation is the most significant element of the story:

"I don't care how much it costs. We're going to have a downtown football stadium," Mayor Fred Wilkins said today.

Direct quotes are never used in a lead. They seldom appear anywhere in a newscast. A paraphrased quotation may begin a story, if preceded by the source:

Mayor Fred Wilkins says he wants a downtown football stadium, no matter what it costs.

An audiotaped statement would not begin a radio news story unless the voice was as familiar as that of the president of the United States. Radio lacks television's advantage of showing a familiar face or identifying a person with a name and title superimposed at the bottom of the screen.

Like radio. However, if an important, dramatic statement was captured on videotape, the videotape may begin the story. In fact, it may begin the newscast or be used in a billboard preceding the newscast.

Story Structure

Shared Approaches:

- Copy that follows the lead should expand upon it. Important facts in a lead should not be ignored while the story follows other trails.
- The background which is needed to understand a news event should be explained. The writer cannot assume that the audience realizes what led to today's event.
- Copy should flow smoothly from sentence to sentence.
- The meaning that a story has for readers, listeners/viewers should be made evident.

Comparisons Across Media:

<i>Newspaper</i>	<i>Radio</i>	<i>Television</i>
1. The inverted pyramid begins with the most important information. Succeeding paragraphs contain details that are less and less important. Editing can be done by cutting from the bottom of the story, but if time permits a story should be edited line by line.	Most newscast items are so short that there is time only for a few of the most important details of a report. Where more time is available, a choice can be made among the inverted pyramid style, the sequential telling of an event, or a combination of the two, starting with the important details.	After an on-camera lead by the anchor or the reporter, a visual story may begin with the most dramatic footage if there is any, then show video that matches the written copy scene for scene. As already noted, if the words and pictures do not support each other, they compete with each other for the viewer's attention. In that case the contest is unequal, for the pictures have more impact.
2. Following a lead sentence or several opening sentences, some events are best related chronologically.	Newscast items are usually too short for any but the most abbreviated chronology. Feature stories may sometimes be reported this way.	Although there is more time for individual stories in a typical television newscast than in a typical radio newscast, the sequential telling of a video story is uncommon

because of the difficulty of finding visual images to support a chronology. The narrative, chronological style is more common to special reports and documentaries.

3. A news item should contain every pertinent fact. Readers who weary midway through the report can turn to another news item. While it would be ideal if every reader read every bit of every item, reality dictates that the reader has the option of when to flip the page.

A news item should contain a limited number of the most important facts. The listener who becomes uninterested midway through the report must either endure the entire report or turn off the station.

Like radio, except that the visual element must be taken into account. Interesting videotape may keep the attention of the viewer who otherwise would become uninterested midway through the report.

Sentence Structure

Shared Approaches:

- Clear communication is essential.
- Writing should be tight. Words not necessary to a story should be omitted. Verbose writing is the mark of the beginner. A lean style marks the professional.
- Ernest Hemingway used to say that the best rules of writing he ever learned came from the first paragraph of the Kansas City *Star* style book given to him as a young reporter. The paragraph reads:

Use short sentences. Use short first paragraphs. Use vigorous English, not forgetting to strive for smoothness. Be positive, not negative.

News writers of all media would agree with this advice.

Comparisons Across Media:

<i>Newspaper</i>	<i>Radio</i>	<i>Television</i>
1. Straightforward declarative sentences are the most frequently written, but dependent clauses at the start of a sentence are perfectly acceptable. To eliminate them from writing will result in a choppy, hard-to-read style: <i>Accusing the Acme Tool Works management of bad faith, 6,000 union employees went on strike this morning.</i>	Dependent clauses should be avoided, especially at the start of a sentence. It is usually better to make a separate sentence of a dependent clause: <i>Six thousand union members at Acme Tool Works are on strike this morning. They accuse management of bad faith.</i>	Like radio.
2. The good writer will choose sentence structure from the rich variety afforded	The good writer generally sticks with a series of short, declarative sentences with	Like the radio journalist, the television news writer assumes that the longer the

by the English language, including long, short, active, declarative, periodic, and passive constructions, although the active voice is preferred to the passive. Clauses may begin sentences or appear between subject and verb or between verb and object.

active voice preferred: subject, verb, object; subject, verb, object; etc.

sentence the less it will be understood. Clauses at the start of sentences or between subject and verb are virtually taboo. Most clauses can stand on their own as separate sentences.

3. A simple declarative style is the ideal but the distance between subject and predicate is not an essential consideration of every sentence, provided that the sentence is grammatical. Here is a sentence from a Minneapolis newspaper (subject and predicate verb are underlined):

A St. Paul man convicted of criminal vehicular operation and drunken driving in connection with an accident that killed his cousin was sentenced Tuesday to one year in the Ramsey County workhouse.

The subject should be as close to the predicate as feasible. The sentence from the Minneapolis newspaper is totally unsuited to being read aloud and understood. A radio lead version might be:

A St. Paul man was sentenced to one year in the county workhouse for a drunk driving accident that killed his cousin.

The writing style considerations are the same as those for radio. However, the news of a man being sentenced to a year in jail for a car accident is unlikely to be included in a television newscast in a city the size of Minneapolis unless the day's news flow has been unusually slow.

4. As a general rule, short sentences are better than long sentences, but it is more

A sentence should be regarded as a package to carry information. The less the

Like radio, short sentences are best, but the occasional long sentence is acceptable if

important to marshal the facts necessary for understanding a news story in a style that is grammatically correct.

package weighs, the easier it will be to understand. Verbless sentences and even phrases may be used.

it is not freighted with difficult words or complex ideas. If your information is not understood it is valueless.

5. Past events are told in the past or perfect tense:

The Pine County grand jury was asked to look into...

or

The Pine County grand jury has been asked to look into.

Some, but not all, newsrooms prefer the present tense for past actions:

The Pine County grand jury is being asked to look into...

and even:

Three persons are killed in a car-truck accident...

Like radio.

Word Choice

Shared Approaches:

- Accuracy remains the watchword for any information medium.
- Verbs that connote action should be chosen in preference to static verbs of being, such as *is* and *was*.
- The active voice both reads and sounds better than the passive voice.
- Copy which was written to impress someone with the writer's knowledge does indeed make an impression, but not what the writer hoped for.
- The writer *must understand* the news story. To simply pass along information without such understanding is a dereliction of the journalist's responsibility. The writer should be able to define any word in the story. The reader or listener cannot be expected to know what the journalist does not know.

Comparisons Across Media:

<i>Newspaper</i>	<i>Radio</i>	<i>Television</i>
1. Proper grammatical usage is essential. A newspaper provides not only information but an educational standard for the community. Sloppy regard for language should be treated as intolerantly as sloppy regard for facts. Accurate spelling, particularly of names and places, is essential. The way a name or place is spelled is, in itself, a fact. Pronunciation is not a consideration.	While correct English matters, communication matters even more. Consequently, while most grammatical errors will not be tolerated, verbless sentences, contractions and other forms of loose writing fit the medium. Incorrect spelling is often overlooked (although it should not be), but mispronunciation is considered a sin. Names likely to be mispronounced are printed both orthographically and phonetically:	Like radio.

In Cairo (KAY-ro) Illinois....

2. Adjectives and adverbs add to understanding and the richness of language. However, the reporter must be careful that the descriptors do not slant the story.

A good editor examines adjectives and adverbs with a sour eye and a red pencil.

Like radio. *Limiting* adjectives, such as numbers, are needed in news. Many *descriptive* adjectives and adverbs can be dropped.

3. Humor, irony, and even parody have their place in feature writing, although not in hard news. The context and writing style must leave the reader with no doubt that humor is intended and the words are not to be taken literally.

The final item in a newscast is often a "brite," a short, humorous story included to bring a smile after the usual collection of tragedies. Irony and parody are avoided for fear of being taken literally.

Humor tends to be restricted to the occasional humorous videotape, to chatting between anchors, and to sports editors and weathercasters. Features are more likely to be of a warm, homey nature than to be funny.

4. Feature writing offers an occasional opportunity for alliteration and clever, subtle plays on language, even puns if they are not overused.

Most turns of phrase should be avoided because they can easily be misunderstood.

Like radio.

5. The best choice is often the simplest word or phrase that comes to mind, but the news writer should possess a large vocabulary derived from wide reading. The choice of the *right* word means the difference between accuracy and almost-accuracy. The writer's ability to pick and

A large vocabulary gives anyone an advantage, but broadcast news writing is normally limited to a vocabulary of simple, widely understood words. The writer should be able to call upon an extensive vocabulary in order to translate complexities into simplicities.

Like radio. Is there a broadcast journalist who has not been instructed to follow the K.I.S.S. rule?

It stands for Keep It Simple, Stupid.

choose from a large working vocabulary assists in developing a desirable writing style.

6. Precision results in accuracy. If the number is \$54,578, that is the way the number should be written.

Numbers should be approximated so that they can be understood and, it is hoped, remembered. The sum of \$54,578 could be stated as *more than 50 thousand dollars*.

More than one option is open.

The reporter can:

- a) follow the radio style of approximating verbally;
- b) use a graphic with the exact number;
- c) state a closer approximation of the number: *more than 54 thousand dollars* or *just under 55 thousand dollars* while at the same time displaying the exact number in a graphic.

7. Unusual terms may be used, but must be defined.

Because unusual terms must be defined, it is better to find familiar terms that can substitute, unless the unusual term is vital to the news story.

Like radio.

Names, Quotes, and Attribution

Shared Approaches:

- All opinions must be attributed to their sources.
- Any statement that implies blame must be attributed. The source's identity should be repeated in every sentence containing an accusation or any other statement that might possibly be considered libelous.
- The source of any statement of doubtful accuracy must be identified. The speaker in a radio taped "actuality" is identified by the newscaster prior to the start of the tape. A person making a statement on television is usually identified by the newscaster or reporter prior to the "sound bite" and again by a "CG super" (character generator superimposition of words on the screen) during the sound bite.
- Facts must be attributed if controversy may attach to them. For example, if the percentage of burglaries rises or the number of gun permits issued declines, the source of that fact must be told.
- Facts that depend on an expert's information must be attributed. For example, if the number of deaths from lung cancer decreases or a space flight will be delayed for a week, the source of that fact must also be made known, whether it is a named individual or an organization.
- The source of quotations, either direct or indirect, must be stated.
- When the statement is about the source, identification is necessary; e.g., *The governor said once again that he is not a candidate for re-election.*
- Use of such vague identifiers as *informed sources* or *sources close to the governor* depend upon editorial policy. Some news organizations permit them only in strictly limited circumstances; other news organizations do not care.
- Reporting someone's words gives a news story authority and vitality.
- The modern style does not include using *Mrs.*, *Miss*, or *Ms.* The first identification gives the person's title, if any, and first and last names. Subsequent identifications may be limited to the last name or the title, or may include both (*Chief Wilson*). Members of the clergy are identified by title each time, with or without the name (*Cardinal Cooke* or *the cardinal*). In obituaries, a sense of respect leads to a more formal style of identification, and usually includes reference to a man as *Mr.* unless he had another title. Sometimes, especially in broadcasting, both first and last names are repeated in a final sentence: *Robert Brown was 65.*

Comparisons Across Media:

Newspaper

1. Direct quotations are common. The person being quoted may be identified at the start, middle, or end of the quote:

"If the sewer bond initiative fails, I feel that I will have no option other than to resign," Mayor Sarah Wilkinson of Pine City said yesterday at a Kiwanis Club luncheon.

2. The attribution may precede, follow, or be integrated in the middle of a statement. It usually follows the statement:

The number of fires blamed on arson rose 50 percent in 1990 compared to 1989, Richard Battle, Pine City fire chief, reported yesterday.

Radio

Except in the form of audio-taped "actualities," direct quotations are uncommon. Radio and television news writers prefer indirect quotes or summaries of statements. The person being quoted is identified before the indirect quotation. A title or other descriptor precedes the name:

Pine City Mayor Sarah Wilkinson says she will resign her office if voters turn down the sewer bond proposal in Tuesday's election.

Attribution always precedes a statement. Effectively, the sentence begins by identifying the source.

Pine City fire chief Richard Battle said there has been a 50 percent increase this year in the number of fires blamed on arson.

Better: an actuality of the fire chief speaking.

Television

Like radio. In addition, if videotape shows the person making the statement, a character generator super identifies the speaker three or four seconds into the video. Identifying the speaker in the intro copy is optional.

It is the usual practice—arguably irritating—to identify a reporter three or four times: in the anchor's intro, by a super, in the reporter's close, and sometimes after the cut back to the anchor.

Like radio. Where possible, videotape should show the source making the statement. If, in this example, the fire chief says, "Fires blamed on arson rose 50% in 1990 compared with 1989." The reporter or anchor should lead into the statement with alternate words:

Pine City Fire Chief Richard Battle says arson is on the rise here.

3. The quotation is the more interesting element, so it usually precedes the attribution.

If the quotation came first, it would sound as if the newscaster was saying these things. Again, attribution first.

As in radio, it must be made clear from the first words of the quote that they are not the newscaster's thoughts.

4. A statement is attributed in the past tense. It is *said*, not *says*.

Whether *said* or *says* is used depends on newsroom policy. There should be consistency no matter which tense is chosen.

Like radio. Generally, past tense indicates a more formal news presentation.

5. In addition to *said*, these are among verbs that may be appropriate: *stated, declared, revealed, added, commented*. *Admitted* and *denied* are, of course, suitable.

The verbs *said* and *says* can be repeated again and again. A variety of synonyms are not needed, but *admitted* and *denied* are suitable.

Like radio. Words other than *said* tend to characterize or color the statement.

6. A short job title (e.g., Fire Chief) usually precedes a name. A longer title or another type of identification follows the name:

...Nancy Smithers, professor of chemical engineering at Pine City College, declared.

Identification always precedes a name:

A professor of chemical engineering at Pine City College, Nancy Smithers, says....

Identification precedes a name. As noted (#1, above), a name identification is optional in introducing a video statement because a super will be used. Even when the anchor identifies the speaker by name, the title may be dropped if it will appear in the super.

7. The identification of a source in terms of title, job, age, address, or any other characteristics should be tightly written but should

Source identification, like all other facts, should be written in a conversational style rather than in the tightest possible manner. That might

If ever a story was a natural for local television, this is it. Every effort will be made to interview the student on tape. The reporter will seek a full

also be as complete as is appropriate to the statement or the news story.

Obviously if the mayor said something quotable about the city budget, neither his age or his address is appropriate. Both age and address are appropriate in quoting someone who ran into a burning building to save a child:

A six-month-old infant was rescued from a burning apartment building in downtown Pine City yesterday by a high school student who saw smoke pouring from a second-story window.

Annie Smith, 17, 2453 Oak Street, North Pine City, said, "The front door was unlocked. I ran into the bedroom and heard this little kid crying, so I grabbed him and ran like heck."

mean breaking the identification into two sentences. If the lead runs long, the *when* of the event is sometimes buried deeper in the report.

A 17-year-old girl ran into a smoke-filled apartment in downtown Pine City to rescue a six-month old baby boy.

She said she saw smoke coming from a second-story window.

The teenager, Annie Smith of North Pine City, said she opened the apartment door, went into the bedroom and, in her words, "I grabbed him and ran like heck."

The fire yesterday...

An actuality with her own voice would, of course, be much better than this description.

description of the actual rescue in her own words. A reporter who was aware of the quote given to the newspaper reporter about running "like heck" may, without putting words in her mouth, endeavor to get the young heroine to repeat it or say something even more colorful.

8. Direct quotes need quotation marks and attribution.

Direct quotes are rare in both radio and television.

Direct quotes, if used at all, should be preceded by a phrase such as *in her words* or *what he called*. Quotation marks should also be placed. They give the newscaster a clue to shift vocal attack.

9. In a second reference, it is better to use the last name alone. Thus, *Secretary of State James Baker* becomes, the second time, *Baker*.

In a second reference, it is better to use the title alone. Thus, *Secretary of State James Baker* becomes, the second time, *The Secretary of State*. Someone being quoted or referred to a second time is probably in the news because of that person's official position. Listeners will be more familiar with the office than the office holder.

Like radio. If the person is shown making a second statement, a super of name and title should be repeated, especially if 15 seconds or more have gone by since the first videotaped statement.

10. If a second quotation from the same source immediately follows the first, it is perfectly acceptable to use a pronoun, e.g., "she said" or "he added."

Beware of pronouns. It is better to repeat a name or an office, so that listeners will not have to pause to recall, "He? Who is he?"

Like radio. Be particularly wary of pronouns that replace antecedents. One of the most troublesome words in broadcasting is the deceptive pronoun "it."

11. Quoting two or three sentences exactly is sometimes the best way to provide readers with an understanding of the point the speaker wants to get across.

An actuality (audio tape recording) is the best way to get a speaker's point across. The voice of the speaker carries nuances missed in print.

A videotape statement is the best way to get a speaker's point across. Indirect quotes are sometimes read by the anchor or the reporter.

12. The principal reason for a direct quote is precision. The accurate direct quote communicates someone's information and attitude precisely.

The principal reasons for an actuality statement are to communicate someone's information and to communicate the mood in choice of words and vocal expression.

The principal reason for a videotape interview is to communicate the feeling that comes out through choice of words, voice, and facial expression.

13. Facts should always be attributed. The public has a right to know where information comes from. For details of an accident or a fire, the source may be as general as *police said* or *according to the fire department* or a *hospital spokesman told reporters*.

Ordinary facts do not need attribution if they come from a trusted source. If a highway patrolman at the scene of an accident says three people were injured, it can be assumed that he is telling the truth. What must be attributed are facts that only an expert would know.

Like radio.

14. The lead-in to a quotation should be specific:

Mayor Jones said, "It is time for the council to reach a decision."

The lead-in to an actuality containing a quote should not be specific, just in case the tape does not roll as planned:

Mayor Jones called for action by the council.

JONES TAPE RUNS :10.

ENDS: ...*decision*.

Like radio. There are times when the wrong videotape appears, sound is lost, the tape comes up late, or some other mischief is created by the gremlins who live in the electronic equipment. A lead-in that allows the newscaster to salvage the moment is best.

15. Attribution adds useful information to a news story. Additional references to a person can bring out additional details of that person's background which are pertinent to the report.

Attribution should be limited. It slows the pace of the report.

Like radio.

Appendix 1: Media Questionnaire

It is widely recognized that news writers differ little in their evaluation of guidelines for their craft. "Clarity," for example, ranks with "motherhood" and "apple pie." For an interview with a news writer to get beyond the obvious, it is necessary to frame questions where some differences of opinion may emerge. This brief questionnaire was prepared with that in mind but, even so, failed to find much disagreement. Seven journalists working in print, radio and television news were chosen to be interviewed in person because of their expressed interest in writing or because of their reputations as writers. The questions are listed here plus a composite of their answers. Their opinions differed very little; duplicated answers were not noted. Only broadcasters answered the broadcast-specific questions. Following each answer, below, professional identification is given only where one individual expressed a view different from the majority view; e.g., in the answer to the first question, everyone interviewed replied "Yes" except for a radio editor whose response was different.

Numerical Precision

1. Do you think an audience has a harder time understanding numbers than other kinds of information?

Yes. (composite answer)

Depends on the number but in general it's not wise to use too many in a radio story. (radio editor)

2. When stating numbers in a story, how detailed should you be?

For newspapers, be precise; for broadcasting, round it off. (composite answer)

3. For example, let's say 6,436 houses were sold last year, or 6,436 credit cards were issued last month. What would you do with that number? Would you approximate? Or would you use the exact number?

For broadcast, round up or down: "upwards of 64 hundred" or "more than six thousand." (composite answer)

The lead should be that house sales were down or up a percentage, whatever that is. (newspaper reporter)

4. How many different numbers are you willing to put in one sentence?

Two. (television producer)

No rule, but be careful. (newspaper reporter)

Not much more than one in a sentence, sometimes not more than one in a paragraph. (radio editor)

5. What kind of visuals would you use to make numbers easier to understand?

Graphics. (composite answer)

6. Lots of numbers are used in certain kinds of stories; for example, sports reports, stock market reports, business and economic news. Is it all right for broadcasters to use a lot of numbers, or do you think numbers are so hard to understand that we should figure some other way to do it? If yes, what other ways can you think of?

Yes, but can't think of any other way besides using graphics. (composite answer)

7. Do you use analogies? (e.g., "The number of cars imported from Japan last year, parked bumper to bumper, would stretch from Minneapolis to Chicago and back.")

Not much use of analogies. (radio editor)

Sure. (radio editor)

No, but I see analogies used all the time. (newspaper reporter)

Attribution and Identification

1. When you identify a source in broadcast news copy, how do you do it? At the beginning of the sentence, the middle, the end? Where in the story? How soon after someone starts speaking do you super them?

At the beginning. (radio editor)

Before the quote, before the fact. (television reporter)

Super the person 2 to 3 seconds after they start speaking. (television reporter)

2. What are your criteria for attributing the source in your story?

Attribute as specifically as possible: name and title. Sometimes this information is supered rather than spoken, using up valuable air time. (composite answer)

Expertise

1. Regarding information that the anchor isn't likely to know, would you always look for a person to attribute information about:

a) a new surgical procedure?

Yes. (composite answer)

b) an increase in lung cancer death from cigarettes?

Yes. (composite answer)

c) a report on pictures from the Hubble telescope?

Yes. (composite answer)

d) news that Czechoslovakia and Bulgaria applied for loans from the World Bank (e.g., "World Bank President Barber Conable announced...")?

Yes. (composite answer)

No. (radio editor)

e) the Bush administration has decided against imposing trade sanctions on India for its barriers to foreign investment and insurance sales. ("U.S. Trade Representative Carla Hills informed Indian Ambassador Abid Hussain of her decision yesterday.")

Attribute this to no specific person. Bush administration is enough. (composite answer)

2. In what manner do you identify the source; i.e., how much information is included? For example: name of the source person, title, institution, locations, official report identification (e.g., "according to the Tower Report").

Identify the salient factor of why they are an expert and/or establish their point of view. (composite answer)

Sentence Structure

1. Do you always prefer short sentences, or do you like to mix them up?

Prefer some short and some shorter. (composite answer)

2. Do you follow any particular rules or patterns about sentence length?

Like to keep sentences short. (composite answer)

I'm drawn to a punchy 2 or 3-word sentence after the preceding sentence or paragraph sets it up. (newspaper reporter)

3. Is there any sentence structure you prefer, such as simple subject/verb/object sentences?

Prefer subject/verb/object sentences. (composite answer)

4. Are you aware of using active verbs instead of passive verbs, or doesn't it matter to you?

Aware. (composite answer)

Prefer active verbs. (television reporter)

5. Are there any kinds of sentence styles that you particularly like? For example, parallel structure or periodic sentences (the subject and verb come at the end of clauses).

I like declarative sentences and sentences that follow the "rule of threes" in parallel structure.

(composite answer)

Choice of Words

1. Are there any words you try to avoid? For example, words that are hard to pronounce (*youths*). Any other words you can think of?

Unique, gutted, providing, either, aunt, rural, towards. (composite answer)

Any words that are the choice of an interest group such as "pro-choice" and "pro-life."

(radio editor)

I count syllables but I don't worry about pronunciation. (television producer)

Verbs ending in -ing. (radio editor)

2. Do you make a special effort to avoid long words? Or do you use difficult words sometimes because you think news has, as part of its mission, general education?

Avoid long words. (composite answer)

I don't steer clear of words just because they're difficult. (radio editor)

3. How about contractions? Do you prefer *do not* or *don't*?

Use contractions. (composite answer)

Avoid contractions. (radio editor)

4. Do you try to avoid negative words like *no* and *not* because they might be confusing? (e.g., Instead of: "The mayor predicted that the project would not be completed on time" would you

write: "The mayor predicted that the project would miss its deadline?") Are you more likely to write "innocent" or "not guilty" as a pleading or a verdict?

Use the verdict "not guilty" because that is the correct legal term and it is not really confusing just because it has a negative word in it. (composite answer)

I prefer "innocent" to "not guilty". (radio editor)

Note: Radio journalists were particularly concerned that using negatives would confuse the audience.

5. Some words might be considered offensive to some people. Are there some words that you would not use in straight copy, but would include if you were quoting somebody else? Would it matter who that other person was? For example, would you be more likely to use a borderline word if you heard the governor or the mayor say it, as compared, say, to someone who was just arrested for multiple murders?

Some public officials swear in front of reporters and the words are never published, but if the governor cursed at Mikhail Gorbachev, we would use it.

I would let the speaker say it if I had the words on tape. Almost nothing is off limits now as far as showing news tape.

It makes no difference who said it. I would use it either way.

I would be more likely to use it if the governor or the mayor said it.

The general rule is that we will allow the person to say it on the air if it is relevant to the news item, but I would not let anything worse than "hell" or "damn" on the air.

Interviews:

- Al Austin WCCO-TV News reporter
- Curtis Beckmann Radio City News owner and editor; former WCCO News director
- Eric Black Minneapolis *Star Tribune* reporter
- Robert Jensen St. Paul *Pioneer Press* copy editor
- Dan Olson KSJN news editor
- Mark Planke KMSP producer; former Minneapolis *Star Tribune* copy editor
- Maureen Reeder KMSP News reporter and anchor

Appendix 2:

Professional Preparation for Writing in Journalism

The undergraduate curriculum of the School of Journalism and Mass Communication (SJMC) of the University of Minnesota is fairly typical of journalism departments and schools at most universities which offer journalism majors, although specifics vary. The standards of the Association for Education in Journalism require that four-fifths of a journalism education should be in liberal arts courses outside of journalism. The rationale is that a journalist should receive a broad liberal arts education.

The University of Minnesota's SJMC offers undergraduates both a professional track and a mass communication track, the latter designed for students who presumably are interested in studying mass communication purely as a liberal art like sociology or anthropology. The SJMC modified its mass communication track in 1991 to allow students to take up to two professional skills courses.

All SJMC students must take two introductory courses:

Introduction to Mass Communication

Producing Mass Media Messages

In addition, all students must choose three of these four courses:

Information for Mass Communication

Visual Communication

The Media in American History and Law: Case Studies

Mass Communication Processes and Structure

All students must also take several courses outside the SJMC curriculum:

- three quarters of English composition (the student may test out of the most basic course)
- two quarters of United States history
- two quarters of basic economics
- one quarter of basic political science
- (for all advertising students) one quarter of basic psychology
- (for all broadcast journalism students) one quarter of speech (writing and delivery)

Admission to upper division programs is on a competitive basis, in which grade point averages, success in a standardized English test, and ability to type are among factors considered. Students admitted to the professional program usually select one of four primary interest areas: advertising, news editorial (newspapers, other print media, public relations), broadcast journalism, or visual communication (still photography, graphic arts). All professional program students must take at

least four "enrichment" courses in the SJMC, among which are journalism history, law, theory, and international studies.

Professional program students usually also choose four or five skills courses; five courses are the maximum number that may count toward a B.A. degree. Most of the skills courses are taken in the student's senior year, in part so that the imparted skills will be fresh in mind when the student graduates and seeks employment. In addition, students are encouraged to take professional internships in the media. Internships may be taken for credit.

Students who intend to become newspaper reporters or editors usually choose skills courses from the following list:

Reporting

Advanced Reporting Methods

Public Affairs Reporting

Interpretive Reporting

Publications Editing

Opinion writing, arts reviewing, reporting about science, and magazine writing are among other writing options.

Students who intend to become television or radio reporters or television producers usually choose skills courses from the following list:

Reporting

Television and Radio News

Electronic News Gathering

Advanced Television News

Television and Radio Documentary

In summary, as to courses partly or wholly concerned with writing, students who intend to write news for newspapers, television, or radio, will take three composition courses outside the SJMC, one general media writing course, one information gathering course, one basic reporting course, and three or four courses in the student's chosen specialty. A major project, required of all student in the College of Liberal Arts, may be satisfied simply by successfully completing any two of the professional skills courses.

In addition, most of the enrichment courses taught in the SJMC require a term paper. Many SJMC faculty members consider writing quality as a factor in assigning a grade.

How writing is taught in any specific skills course may vary from instructor to instructor and course to course. Assignments in the basic reporting course probably include reporting interviews, news conferences, public meetings, features, and such routine hard news stories as arrests and fires. Students are graded on accuracy (for some instructors any factual error brings an automatic "F" to a paper), choice of facts to include in the lead, news story structure, writing style, and spelling.

To cite a different example, students in the advanced television news course are graded on their news "packages," in which consideration is given to a number of photographic and video editing factors as well as the matching of words and pictures, in addition to the choice of facts for leads, story structure, and clarity.

Journalism faculty members realize that they cannot turn out students skilled as reporters and writing. Only time and experience can do that, and even time and experience do not guarantee journalistic competence. Their more modest hope is that their graduates can find a place in a fast-paced, competitive field and hang on long enough to develop skills for which, one day, they will be praised.

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This list comprises books that teach the skills of journalism. The titles present a reasonably accurate guide to their content. Many books are written on the subject of news writing, in part because it seems natural for a professional news writer to turn his or her hand to the task of assembling a book about the subject. If for no other reason than this, the topic of news writing is well covered, and probably better covered than, say, books on civil engineering. Although differences exist in the topics undertaken, the reader must search diligently to discover any disagreement in how to write news.

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